

The Second Language Acquisition of Past Tense Marker in English by L1 Speakers of Chinese

LE PASSÉ DANS L'ACQUISITION DE L'ANGLAIS EN TANT QU'UNE DEUXIÈME LANGUE PAR LES LOCUTEUR DU CHINOIS

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Abstract: This study is considered the L2 acquisition and underlying of past tense marker, focusing on whether or not L2 learners of English are successful in associating the grammatical properties with Chinese language. Although the dataset is small, the results showed that Chinese speakers are able to acquire the past-tense marker although Chinese language has none of this feature. The L1 Chinese speakers are able to acquire the regular past-tense marker better compared to the irregular form.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; Past tense marker; L1 Chinese speakers; Irregular form

Résumé: Cet article étudie l'acquisition d'une deuxième langue, et en particulier l'apprentissage du passé, en se concentrant sur le fait si les apprenants de l'anglais pouvaient réussir à associer les propriétés grammaticales de la langue anglaise avec la langue chinoise. Bien que l'ensemble des données est faible, les résultats montrent que les locuteurs du chinois sont capable de maîtriser le passé, même si la langue chinoise n'a pas cette fonctionnalité. Les locuteurs du chinois maîtrise mieux le passé en forme régulière par rapport en forme irrégulière.

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*Received 12 June 2009; accepted 16 June 2009

Mots-Clés: acquisition d'une deuxième langue; temps passé; les locuteurs du chinois; forme irrégulière

1. INTRODUCTION

There are various theories put forward in explaining the development of second language acquisition. These theories can be mainly divided into two groups those that posit no L1 influence on L2 acquisition such as the Skill Acquisition Theory, Universal Grammar and those who say L1 has influence on the acquisition of L2 such as the Autonomous Induction Theory.

It is widely assumed that when L2 learners produce forms those native speakers of the target language would produce will not be the same. This is and must be the influence of the learner's first language. However, research on second language acquisition has moved from this basic assumption as well as of the assumption that similarities and references between a speaker's native language (L1) and the target second language (L2) alone is sufficient in acquiring the L2. In the past 30 years or so there are many empirical observations about L2 learners performance that shows evidence where transfer of properties from L1 to L2 cannot be explained. The language acquisition is the result of unconscious internal mental processes rather than conscious learning. An example, it has been reported by Stauble (1984) that all L2 learners of English, whatever their L1, have difficulty with the 3rd person present tense agreement marker -s.

Languages are basically made of sounds, phonemes that form words, words are put together to form sentences and these words and sentences convey the message and aids in communication. However, each language has its own phoneme, syntactic and morphological rules that govern that particular language. Similarity between one language and another language is based on where they sit in the conventional family-tree-diagram of language-relatedness. There are some languages that are from two different continents that cannot be linked in a tree such as the Asian languages, Indo-European languages and the Proto-Gmc group of languages (Lyons, 1981).

One of the Asian languages is the Chinese language. It has many interesting features such as it being a pro-drop language which does not have wh-movement. It is a tonal language and uses different contoured pitches to differentiate between words that have the same phonemes. The modern dialects like Mandarin have 4 tones while older dialects have more. One of the oldest dialects, the Cantonese, has 9 tones and these tones are still retained and in use until today. For example, the phoneme "si" in Cantonese could mean the following, depending on tone, namely poetry/corpse, cause/waste/history, taste/try, time, market/city, soldier/to be, know/color, tongue and eat/eclipse (Yee, n.d.).

Tones in Chinese are set at relative pitches to each other, thus one implication of tones is that a speaker or listener cannot be tone-deaf. In Chinese the verbs do not conjugate, and they do not need to agree with gender or plurality of the subject. Generally languages that are rich with inflection will have loose word order such as the Spanish while languages that are with few inflections will have strict word order. Since the Chinese language is few in inflections thus it has very strict word order. Due to not having that many inflections it is also a tenseless language. The Chinese does not mark tense through morphological inflections like other languages such as English and Spanish do. Chinese language refers to time lexically through hours, adverbs and adverbial phrases. In addition, the perception of aspect in Chinese also seems to differ where importance is placed more on the temporality of a situation rather than on its shape (Beihl, 2007).

The tense systems conceptualize time as a linear flow, and demarcate this flow into sections through the use of tense. On a time line, the present moment is the only point that is allowed to move and thus tenses; past and future are centre around the present. But, the Chinese deal with timing of events with an aspectual marker. Thus timing of events in a sentence or conversation is marked using the aspectual markers and this could usually be understood based on discourse. In special cases where it is not possible

the words for yesterday, now and tomorrow could be added (Lardiere, 2003; Yee, n.d.).

In the English language the use of words such as yesterday, now and tomorrow would not be required since the verb carries the tense. In the English language the verbs are inflected with an ‘-ed’ to represent past tense. But, not all verbs can go through the –ed inflection since there are morpheme and phonetic rule constraints. Thus, some verbs are inflected differently in the case of past tense. These verbs are called irregular verbs. According to Hawkins (2000) “One view of [+past] is that it is not an intrinsic feature of T, as [+infinite] might be, but is parameterised, with some languages selecting it and some not. Chinese, in contrast to English, appears not to have selected [+past], although it does have syntactic reflexes of a [+infinite] features.” (Lardiere, 2003).

“What does it take to acquire past tense in English?” is according to Hawkins (2000), *parameter-(re)setting*. Thus under this rule we would not expect to find verbs inflected for past tense in the L2 if the L1 parameter value is unselected for [+past] and has not been reset in the course of acquiring the L2 (Lardiere, 2003). Here in this study we would like to determine if this is the case in acquiring past tense marker in English by the Malaysian Chinese who speaks Chinese as their first language. Furthermore, we would like to determine their acquisition level between the regular and irregular

Past tense, which can also be referred to as the ‘exclusive past’ (Huddleston, 1984, p. 158), is commonly used to define certain time in the past that took place before present time and excludes the present (Leech, 1971). We can usually find words like just now, yesterday, and twenty years ago, time adverbials that are used to define a definite past time. An example would be: I went to the shop yesterday. Past tense can also be used as ‘backshifting’ (Huddleston, 1984), where it uses verb or verbs (past tense) in a subordinate clause, which is within a larger clause. The larger clause contains a past tensed verb. For instance: She told me you had beautiful clothes. (Although it is in past tense, it shows that the clothes are still there in the present time). Huddleston notes that this is optional, and the subordinate clause can still use present tense instead of past tense.

Tense in English is marked on the first verb in a tensed verb group (Svalberg & Chuchu, 1998). What is past simple? It can be understood as: past tense, but with simple aspect. How is past simple formed? It is formed with a finite verb + ‘ed’ (most common type of past tense) and in a few different ways for irregular verbs.

This review is uses the comparisons between the difference of English and Chinese use of the past tense. What are the differences between the usages of past tense in these two languages? English verbs have past tense; however, Chinese verbs do not have past tenses. Chinese uses auxiliary verbs, particles or even time verbs to indicate time. This is the Chinese form of using past tense.

Auxiliary verbs that are used to indicate tense include verbs like ‘yào’ (will, to be going to) and ‘xiǎng’ (really want, thinking of something). Words like ‘le’ (indicates a past event in a present perfect tense), and ‘guo’ that refers to a simple past action, are examples of particles to indicate time in Chinese. Time verbs are used to indicate the time where an event takes place. Words like ‘zuótiān’ (yesterday) and ‘xiàge xīngqī’ (next week) are time verbs. For instance:

1st. Wǒ mǎi dōngxi. (Chinese)

I buy things. (Direct translation)

I buy things. (Correct translation)

2nd. Wǒ míngtiān yào mǎi dōngxi. (Chinese)

I tomorrow want buy things. (Direct translations)

I will buy things tomorrow. (Correct translation)

3rd. Wǒ zuótiān mǎi dōngxi le. (Chinese)

I yesterday buy things already. (Direct translation)

I bought things yesterday. (Correct translations in Past tense)

2. METHODS

The selection of informants for the study was final year student who are currently pursuing B.A. Mandarin in Universiti Putra Malaysia. An IELTS (International English Language Testing System) proficiency test was given out to students to test their level of English and 20 candidates were selected based from the test. They were low level learners of English language. The IELTS test comprises two comprehension test, students are required to read the text and answer the question based on the reading text.

The data sources for this project were task-based questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire consists of three sections. The first session was to fill in the blanks with the appropriate form of past tense whereas the second session was to circle the accurate response based on the particular statement and lastly the third session was to change the sentences into simple past tense form.

The first session consists of 17 questions that the students needed to fill in the blanks. There were 6 questions on regular past tense and 11 questions on irregular past tense. There was a variety of irregular questions that were tested on the students. Out of the 11 questions, 1 question was on irregular simple past tense 'BE', 3 questions were on irregular verbs which changed completely and 7 questions were on irregular verbs which changed their vowels.

The second session consists of 20 statements that the students needed to identify whether the statement was definitely correct, probably correct, incorrect or definitely incorrect. The students had to read the statement and circle the appropriate responses. In this session there were six questions on regular past tense, two questions with the combination of regular and irregular past tense in the sentence, four distracter questions and eight questions on irregular past tense that looked at the verbs which changed completely as well irregular verbs which changed their vowels.

The third session consists of 12 questions that the students needed to change the sentences into simple past tense. There were four questions on regular past tense, one question with the combination of regular past tense and irregular past tense and seven questions on irregular past tense. There was a variety of irregular questions that were tested on the students. Out of the seven questions, one question was on irregular verbs which do not change, one question was on verb which changed completely, two questions were on irregular BE and there questions were on irregular verbs which changed their vowels.

An oral production test was conducted using five students from the above group. They were asked five questions on regular verbs and five questions on irregular verbs. The subjects were required to give the correct past tenses accordingly. The questions were asked individually and they were given five seconds to answer each question. The answers were recorded and analysed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the data collected indicate that regular past tense marker scores were consistently higher in the regular form compared to the irregular form at all data collection sessions. The first test that is the Grammatically Judgement Test, the results from the data collected indicates that Chinese L1 speakers acquired the regular form better compared to the irregular form. In the regular form, 65% of the L1 speakers acquired well the regular past – tense marker and 35% did not acquire well the regular from (Figure 1). On the other hand for the irregular form, 53.33% of the respondents acquired the irregular

form compared to the remaining 46.67% who did not acquire it.

In Part B, which is a test based on ungrammatical stimuli, shows that 31% of students got the answers wrong for the regular form (Figure 2). About 50% of the students got it definitely or probably correct while 17% definitely got it wrong for the regular verb form. On the irregular questions, the percentage is evenly spread out between the four choices of answers. This shows that the students are not sure or aware of whether the structure of the sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical in the first place. This is because of the students are low level students of English language.

From our research graph in Part C, which is a written production test, we notice that 76% of the students answered correctly for the regular past tense and 65% of students answered correctly on the irregular questions (Figure 3). The differences between the regular and irregular past tense is 11%. This shows that the students acquired the past tense as opposed to their L1 which do not have a past tense marker to indicate the past.

In the final part of the questionnaire, an oral production test was carried out. It is found that 76% of the students acquired the regular past tense form (Figure 4). On the other hand, 52% of the students acquired the irregular past tense form. 24% of the students did not know the regular past tense verb form, while 40% of the students did not know the irregular verb form. This shows that the irregular verb form is harder to acquire compared to the regular verb forms.

From the four tables above, the results for the study are Chinese L1 speakers have acquired some part of the past tense marker especially the regular verb forms compared to the irregular verb forms but not the whole complete form for both verb forms. Chinese language is a tenseless language and as we have mentioned earlier parameter- (re)setting takes place. This is because the Chinese L1 speakers do not attain a high rate of past tense marking in acquiring English as compared to native speakers of English.

The L1 Chinese speakers can easily determine what kind of language they are acquiring and input data (past tense marker) are said to trigger the appropriate parametric choice for the language being acquired (Lightfoot, 1989). The input determines the choice between parameter values made available by UG (White, 2007). This can be seen in Table 1. If interlanguage competence is UG-constrained, then the L2ers reset the \pm past-tense marker parameter in the interlanguage grammar.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the judgement test that we have conducted, it is evident that the controlled group are low in English Language competence. However, they have acquired the regular past tense marker but the acquisition level in using the irregular past tense marker is low. This may be due to them being unable to differentiate between the regular and irregular verbs. Thus, it shows that the L1 Chinese speaker have acquired the past tense markers based on the regular verbs. Hence, they have reset the parameter for past tense marker using their interlanguage competence, from tenseless language to a tensed language. In order to advance the debate, further research should be carried out with larger datasets and having a controlled group to compare the results.

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Table 1. Parameters and Constraints Relating to Past Tense

Constraints	Parameters	
English	+ past tense	Past tense markers activated
Chinese	- past tense	Past tense markers inactive

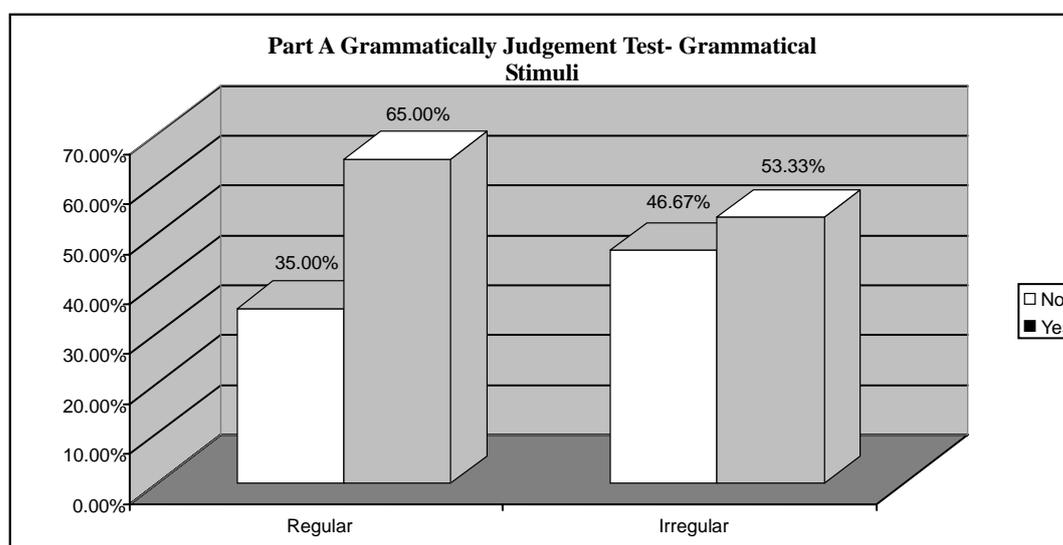


Figure 1. Grammatically Judgement Test- Grammatical Stimuli

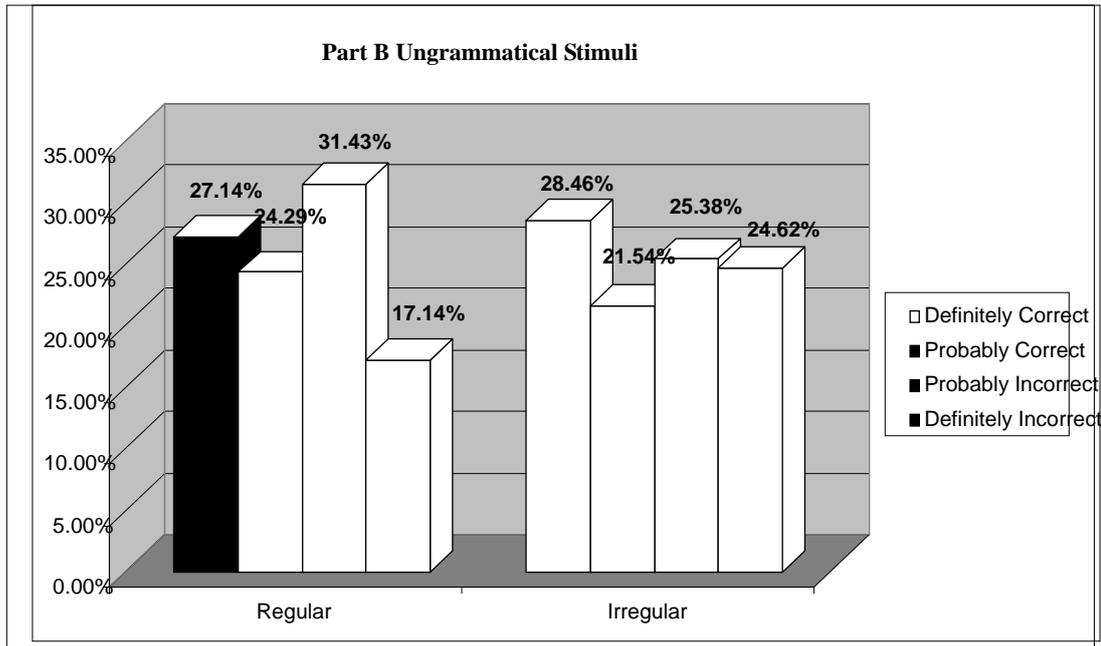


Figure 2. Grammatically Judgment Test- Ungrammatical Stimuli

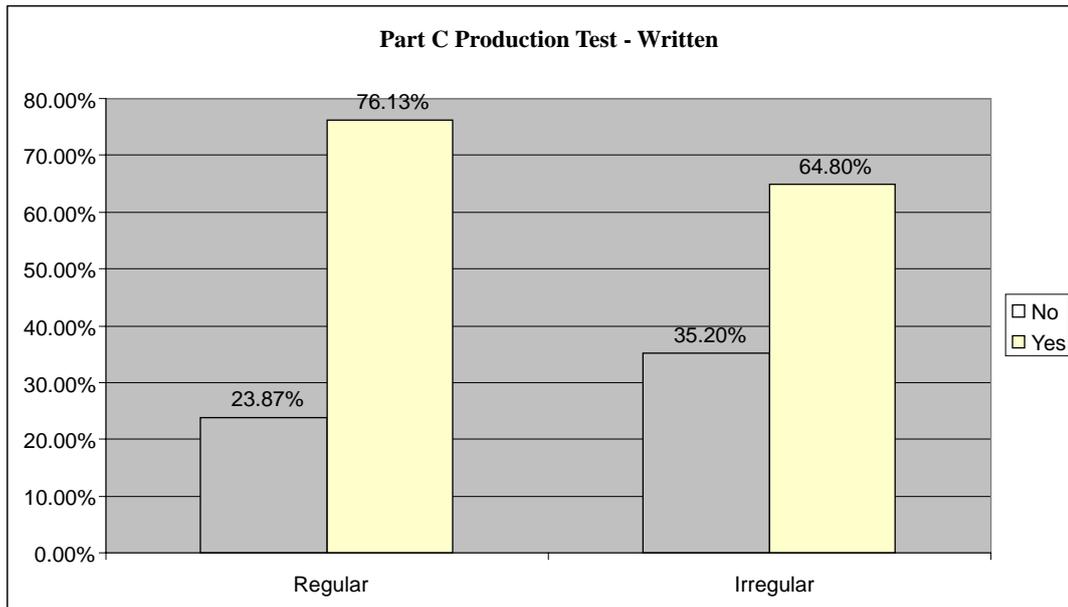


Figure 3. Production Test –Written

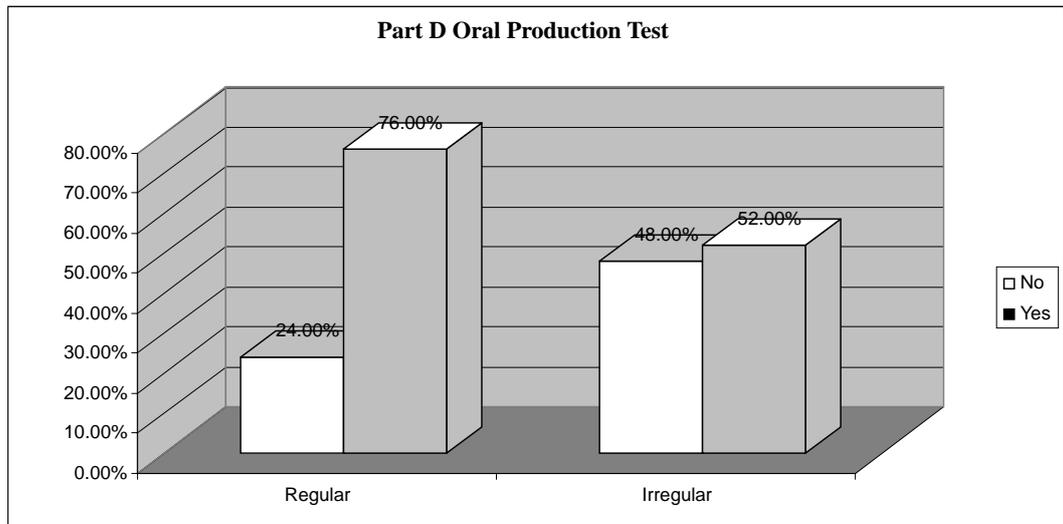


Figure 4. Production Test –Oral

Editor: Martin Gagnon